

Handling paradoxes in the Bible

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In Luke 5, we have the story of Jesus healing the paralytic. He did it as proof of His authority, as God, to forgive sins. The crowd's reaction is given in verse 26. And they were all seized with astonishment and began glorifying God; *and they were filled with fear, saying, "We have seen remarkable things today"* [emphasis mine]. They had witnessed a man convincingly demonstrate the role of God—a **paradox**. Interestingly, the word in the Greek translated *remarkable things* is *paradoxa*. "Webster's College Dictionary" defines *paradox* as "a seemingly contradictory or absurd statement that expresses a possible truth." The word *paradox* comes from the Greek *paradoxos* and is composed of *para* = *beside* and *doxa* = *opinion* ["Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words," page 1102]).

Example of a Biblical Paradox

The Trinity is a biblical paradox. On one hand, the Bible clearly teaches monotheism, that there is one and only one God and He is one. "*Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God; the LORD is one*" (Deuteronomy 6:4). Yet, the Bible also teaches that the one God actually consists of three persons, the Trinity. "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit*" (Matthew 28:19).

Dealing with Biblical Paradoxes

- In the example of the Trinity, we see that a true paradox exists in the Bible. They are seemingly contradictory teachings. But **apparent contradictions are not actual contradictions**. For example, the Bible never says that God is three Persons and that He is one Person. That would be an actual contradiction. One reaction to biblical paradoxes is simply to claim that the Bible is self contradictory, therefore untrue, and dismiss any serious consideration of Scripture. Unfortunately, many have taken this dead end.
- Another reaction is to dogmatically accept only one side of the paradox and dismiss the other side. For example, many Christians, including whole denominations, have rigidly taken either the view of predestination or the view of free will. Many others try to find some middle ground. For example, they may say that man has 50% free will and God has 50% sovereignty. Of course, this is absurd because 50% of either free will or sovereignty is, in fact, neither. This, the Bible does not teach. It teaches 100% of each. Therefore, the mature view of paradoxes is first to be sure that you are dealing with a true paradox, not just a difficult passage. Don't be too quick to "punt" to a paradox.
- Then, if you're convinced you have a true paradox such as the Trinity or predestination and free will, accept **both** extremes. Why? Because the Bible teaches both extremes. Dealing with paradoxes in this manner is a recognition of (1) our limited knowledge, (2) the authority of Scripture, and (3) the sovereignty of God (Psalm 139).

Questions and Answers

Q: *What is a paradox?*

A: A paradox is "a seemingly contradictory or absurd statement that expresses a possible truth."

Q: *Are there paradoxes in the Bible?*

A: Yes, there are some paradoxes, such as the Trinity or predestination and free will. They teach as true two seemingly opposite sides of an issue.

Q: *How should we deal with paradoxes?*

A: First, make certain that we are dealing with a true paradox, not just a difficult passage. Then accept, as true, both extremes of the paradox. We should accept both extremes, recognizing our limited knowledge, because the Bible teaches both sides as true.